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Pillars of salt: The transformation of New England crime literature, 1674–1860

Cohen, Daniel Asher, Ph.D.

Brandeis University, 1989

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PILLARS OF SALT:

THE TRANSFORMATION OF NEW ENGLAND CRIME LITERATURE, 1674-1860

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

Brandeis University

Department of History

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by

Daniel A. Cohen

August, 1988

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This dissertation, directed and approved by the candidate's Committee, has been accepted and approved by the Graduate Faculty of Brandeis University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

Pillars of Salt:

The Transformation
of
New England Crime Literature, 1674-1860

A dissertation Presented to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Brandeis
University, Waltham, Massachusetts

by Daniel A. Cohen

The subjects of crime and punishment were sources of endless fascination for the readers of colonial and early national New England. Between 1674 and 1860, literally hundreds of books, pamphlets, and broadsides relating to the lives and deaths of criminals were issued from the printing presses of the region. Although execution sermons were the first works evoked by such cases, the literature eventually encompassed a variety of other genres, including conversion narratives, gallows poetry, "last speech" broadsides, autobiographical pamphlets, trial reports, romantic biographies, crime novels, and newspaper stories. Perhaps no other branch of early American popular literature surpassed crime publications in generic variety and complexity. This dissertation traces the evolution of New England crime literature over a period of nearly two-hundred years, relating the

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pattern of genre development to broader changes in culture and society. The study relies primarily on close readings of the crime publications themselves, but also makes use of court records and draws upon an extensive body of existing scholarship on the legal, religious, literary, cultural, and social history of the region.

Most of New England's early crime publications fall into one of three broad categories, each roughly associated with a chronological sub-period. The first category, ascendant between 1674 and 1730, consisted of sermons and conversion narratives that reflected a cohesive literary culture dominated by orthodox ministers and committed to the propagation of Protestant piety. The second category, popular between 1730 and 1800, included "last speech" broadsides and longer criminal autobiographies that signaled the breakdown of Puritan cultural hegemony and expressed a number of powerful ideological insurgencies. The third category, dominant between 1800 and 1860, featured trial reports, romantic biographies, and newspaper stories that mirrored an increasingly secular and pluralistic regional culture. My findings suggest that the literary order of antebellum New England was the product of a long process of cultural breakdown and transformation that began before the American Revolution and ended at about the turn of the nineteenth century, with the emergence of a pluralistic society committed to shared legal and romantic values.

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Preface

The subjects of crime and punishment were sources of endless fascination for the readers of colonial and early national New England. Between 1674 and 1860, literally hundreds of books, pamphlets, and broadsides relating to the lives and deaths of criminals were issued from the printing presses of the region.[1] Although execution sermons were the first works evoked by such cases, the literature eventually encompassed a variety of other genres, including conversion narratives, gallows poetry, "last speech" broadsides, autobiographical pamphlets, trial reports, romantic biographies, crime novels, and newspaper stories. Perhaps no other branch of early American popular literature surpassed crime publications in generic variety and complexity.

New England's literature of crime and punishment was anything but static. Different forms were more or less popular in different periods. Significant changes also took place within individual genres. The various forms did not come and go at random. Rather they evolved in accordance with broader social and cultural rhythms. What was the overall pattern of change and development? How did the various genres evolve over time? Why did one form give way to another? The following study will examine the gradual

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transformation of New England crime literature over the course of nearly two hundred years, seeking to explain how and why the various genres evolved as they did.

Of course, the transformation of regional crime literature did not take place in a vacuum. Modern cultural historians have traced a broad transformation in American publishing patterns over the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, discovering a transition from a literary culture of piety, cohesion, scarcity, to one of variety, competition, and abundance.[2] In describing that process, scholars have postulated a variety of "turning points," including a withdrawal of genteel elites from traditional culture by the 1740s, a massive mobilization of colonial readership during the successive political crises of the 1760s through 1790s, a revolution in reading tastes represented by the rise of the novel during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and a succession of innovations in printing and distribution technologies beginning during the second half of the eighteenth century and accelerating during the second quarter of the nineteenth. How do those developments relate to the evolution of such genres as execution sermons, criminal autobiographies, and trial reports? Since New England crime literature was a branch of popular print culture that persisted and evolved over the entire period in question, the following case study should help clarify the causes and timing of that larger transformation in publishing patterns.

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The transition in literary culture was just one aspect of a still broader transformation in the very nature of New England society, a shift from cohesive and homogeneous religious communities to a more secular, individuated, and pluralistic social order. Two other aspects of that transformation related to changes in religious culture and in patterns of social control. The timing of those changes has recently become the subject of some historical controversy. Against the theory of a gradual shift in New England theology from piety to moralism over the course of the eighteenth century, Harry S. Stout has argued that Protestant piety persisted undiminished, at least through the revolutionary crisis.[3] Similarly, against the theory of a gradual rise in crime and disorder over the course of the eighteenth century, David H. Flaherty has argued that social control remained highly effective throughout the provincial period.[4] Do execution sermons support Stout's thesis? Do criminal autobiographies confirm Flaherty's claim? In short, can New England crime literature shed any light on those two controversial issues and on the timing of the broader social transformation that they reflect? The answers to those questions will emerge in the pages that follow.

Acknowledging intellectual debts is both a duty and a pleasure. This study would not have been possible without the guidance and assistance of more people than I can hope to thank here. I was generously supported throughout most of my time as a graduate student in the History of American

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Civilization program at Brandeis University by a Crown Fellowship. I was aided during my long years of research by countless able librarians and staff members at the Goldfarb Library, Brandeis University; Houghton Library, Harvard University; Beinecke Library, Yale University; the Library of the Boston Athenaeum; the Boston Public Library; and the American Antiquarian Society, as well as at other research facilities. I was guided and stimulated by my contacts with scholars at various institutions, including Paul Bischoff, David H. Flaherty, Robert A. Gross, David D. Hall, Karen Halttunen, James A. Henretta, David R. Kasserman, and Randolph A. Roth, as well as by such current and former Brandeis faculty members as John Demos, Michael T. Gilmore, Christine L. Heyrman, Morton Keller, Alexander Keyssar, James T. Kloppenberg, Marvin Meyers, and Donald E. Worster. Of course, my primary intellectual mentor at Brandeis has been David H. Fischer, a scholar and teacher of unbounded energy, broad learning, brilliant insights, and masterful editorial judgments. I would also like to thank the editors of American Quarterly and Journal of Social History for permission to use material (drawn from Chapters 5 and 6 respectively) that has been, or will be, published in their journals.

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could have a more helpful, or loyal, or caring group of friends and colleagues than Daniel S. Dupre, Carol A. Ely, Ruth L. Friedman, J. Matthew Gallman, Wendy E. Gamber, C. Dallett Hemphill, John S. Hill, Tamara C. Miller, June Namias, William J. Novak, David Palmer, Thomas R. Pegram, James T. Pokorny, David B. Sicilia, Eleanor A. Sparagana, David B. Starr, Susan L. Tananbaum, Alan S. Taylor, and Howard M. Wach. Words cannot adequately express my debt to Jill E. Erickson; her loving friendship has been a source of boundless comfort and joy. Finally, my parents, Gloria and Morris L. Cohen, have stood by me all along, providing the emotional, intellectual, and material support without which I could not possibly have completed this dissertation. To them, most of all, I dedicate what follows.

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Notes

[1] For citations of those works published before 1801, see Wilfred J. Ritz, comp., American Judicial Proceedings First Printed Before 1801 (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1984); for many of those published between 1680 and 1820, see Allan C. Tappe, "Who Was to Blame?: Responsibility for Capital Crimes in America, 1680-1820" (unpublished research paper, Brandeis University, n.d.), pp. 57-64; for those relating to American murder cases through 1860 and beyond, see Thomas M. McDade, comp., The Annals of Murder: A Bibliography of Books and Pamphlets on American Murders From Colonial Times to 1900 (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961); also see Ronald A. Bosco, "Early American Gallows Literature: An Annotated Checklist," Resources for American Literary Study, 8 (1978), 81-107. Most of those works are also cited in one or another of the following standard bibliographies of early American imprints: Charles Evans, comp., American Bibliography, 14 vols. (New York: Peter Smith/Worcester, Ma.: American Antiquarian Society, 1941-1959); Roger P. Bristol, comp.,Supplement to Charles Evans' American Bibliography (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1970); Ralph R. Shaw and Richard H. Shoemaker, comps., American Bibliography: A Preliminary Checklist for 1801[-1819], [19] vols. (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1958-63); Richard H. Shoemaker, comp., A Checklist of American Imprints for 1820[-1829], [10] vols. (New York/Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1964-1971); and successor volumes.

[2] See Robert A. Gross, "The Authority of the Word: Print and Social Change in America, 1607-1880" (unpublished paper, 1984); David D. Hall, "Introduction: The Uses Of Literacy in New England, 1600-1850," in William L. Joyce, et al, eds., Printing and Society in Early America (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1983), pp. 1-47; Richard D. Brown, "Afterword: From Cohesion to Competition," in Joyce, et al, eds., Printing and Society, pp. 300-309.

[3] For the earlier theory, see Joseph Haroutunian, Piety Versus Moralism: The Passing of the New England Theology (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1932); for Stout's view, see Harry S. Stout, The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[4] For the earlier theory, see Carl Bridenbaugh, Cities in

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the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life in America, 1625-1742 (1938; rpt. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 68-78, 220-231, and 379-391; Bridenbaugh, Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America, 1743-1776 (1955; rpt. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 110-122 and 299-305; for Flaherty's view, see David H. Flaherty, "Crime and Social Control in Provincial Massachusetts," The Historical Journal, 24 (1981), 339-360.

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-- Chapter 1 --

An Overview:
The Succession of Genres, 1674-1860

Because of the great variety and complexity of New England crime genres, it may be helpful to begin with a general overview of the literature, describing each of the different forms in chronological order of appearance. The first genre introduced to the region was the gallows sermon; it remained the only form through the end of the seventeenth century. During the thirty years after 1700, printers and ministers experimented with at least three different crime genres imported from England, but none of them became very popular. After 1730, printers began producing two types of broadsides--gallows poetry and autobiographical "last speeches"--as popular literary alternatives to execution sermons. Later in the century, they began to publish longer criminal (auto)biographies as pamphlets and even books. Finally, after 1800, a strikingly new configuration of crime literature emerged, consisting of trial reports, romantic biographies and novels, and increasingly elaborate newspaper stories. Each of those crime genres will now be defined and described, providing a general overview of the literature as a whole, before moving on to

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the more detailed case studies of the subsequent chapters.

Early Execution Sermons

Few civic occasions aroused as much popular interest in early New England as public hangings. Judged strictly in terms of attendance, criminal executions were the preeminent public events on the regional calendar. Even during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, crowds at local gallows reportedly numbered well into the thousands.[1] Those great occasions did not go unnoticed by the region's moral spokesmen. Public hangings were prominent among the variety of extraordinary communal events addressed by early New England ministers.[2] Clergymen typically delivered sermons dealing with capital cases on the Sunday preceding an execution or on the day of the hanging itself. Contemporary accounts suggest that early execution discourses were almost as well attended as the actual hangings.[3] In addition to the throngs that listened in person, a still wider audience gained access to those sermons through their subsequent appearance in print.

Although discourses to condemned prisoners were frequently delivered in early modern England and were often synopsized in other crime publications, they were rarely if ever published as separate books or pamphlets.[4] As an autonomous literary genre, the execution sermon thus seems to have been an innovation of the New England Puritans.[5] In

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contrast to the barely reputable prison chaplains who typically delivered gallows sermons in England, the authors of New England execution discourses included many of the region's leading clergymen, among them such notables as Cotton Mather, Benjamin Colman, and Charles Chauncy.[6] The first published execution sermon appeared at Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1674; one of the last was issued at Worcester, Massachusetts in 1825.[7] During the intervening years, scores of gallows discourses issued from the presses of the region; only a handful were published during that period outside New England.[8]

Even the earliest of New England's gallows sermons were carefully fitted to the occasion of an imminent hanging. Clergymen explained how condemned criminals had been led to their fatal wickedness, warned others against the same sort of misconduct, and justified the use of capital punishment. Although they invariably addressed the community at large, ministers also generally applied themselves directly to the doomed prisoners.[9] Preachers berated offenders for their wickedness, exhorted them to repentence, and instructed them on how to seek salvation during their brief remaining time on earth.

Despite the thematic variations required by public hangings, early execution discourses were in many respects hardly distinguishable from the bulk of other Puritan sermons that dominated the literary output of New England during the seventeenth century.[10] Much of the close resem-

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blance resulted from a shared literary structure; the first published execution sermons adhered closely to the standard format of the Puritan discourse. The preacher invariably began by introducing the sermon's "text," a passage from the Bible; drew from that text a "doctrine," the minister's thesis; and then proceeded with the doctrine's "application," a series of pertinent instructions and exhortations.

The similarities went beyond structure to content as well. Gallows discourses were permeated by the standard sermonic themes of divine sovereignty, communal degeneracy, individual depravity, and the overriding human need for salvation through Christ. Indeed, early execution sermons sought to integrate extraordinary and perhaps frightening communal events into the familiar theological categories of Puritan dogma. In the still largely cohesive covenanted communities of late seventeenth century New England, no other types of explanation were either sought or offered.

Appended Materials

Although the first two execution sermons published in New England appeared as simple pamphlets, the format of later works became more complex.[11] Many of the twenty or so volumes of execution sermons published between 1686 and 1726 contained a variety of supplementary materials, including confessions or warnings by condemned criminals, dialogues between ministers and malefactors, and accounts of earlier capital cases.[12] Those added elements closely resembled

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similar sections of contemporary English compilations.[13] Most of the appended materials served to reinforce doctrinal messages prominent in the discourses themselves. Some stressed motifs of warning; others emphasized themes of salvation.[14]

Yet not all of the execution volumes were purely pious. On the contrary, some of the materials appended to sermons by Cotton Mather after the turn of the eighteenth century reflected a new interest in providing readers with factual information on capital cases, whatever their spiritual significance.[15] Mather and his publishers apparently recognized that the public's fascination with the gallows extended beyond their utility in dramatizing theological doctrine. During that same period, printers began to experiment with other literary vehicles, independent of the sermon form, for satisfying the public's fascination with the subjects of crime and punishment. Eventually, they settled on execution broadsides and longer autobiographical narratives as popular alternatives to the traditional gallows discourse.[16]

Later Sermons

Although the ministers had lost their monopoly over the region's crime literature by the 1730s, execution sermons continued to appear in a persistent, if somewhat intermittent, stream throughout the eighteenth century and

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beyond. Fluctuations in output probably had more to do with the varying incidence of criminal executions than with changes in literary vogue. In all, more than seventy-five volumes of execution sermons were published in the region between 1674 and 1825; over two-thirds of those appeared after 1730.[17] Many of those later execution discourses contained supplementary materials, but in virtually all of them the sermon itself was the primary literary focus.

In terms of format, the gallows sermon had come full-circle by the early decades of the nineteenth century. Although the first published execution discourses had stood alone as topical variants of the standard Puritan sermon, subsequent examples had attracted supplementary materials that in some cases overshadowed the sermons themselves. However, once New England publishers found other acceptable means of meeting the public's demand for informative and entertaining accounts of capital cases, published execution sermons tended to drift back toward their original role as vehicles for the pulpit messages of local ministers. By the time the execution sermon form expired during the early decades of the nineteenth century, other crime genres had long since emerged to satisfy the more worldly literary tastes of New England readers.

Transplanted English Genres

While execution sermons were to remain New England's dominant form of gallows literature until the 1730s, at

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least three other crime genres were introduced to the region during the early eighteenth century. Unlike published execution sermons--in some respects a New England innovation--those new forms were modeled on well-established British genres. As such, they reflected a broader process of cultural borrowing that was undermining Puritan culture and anglicizing New England society during the early decades of the new century.[18] However, despite their English origins, none of those imported genres became very popular in the region, at least during the eighteenth century.

The first of the transplanted forms was the criminal conversion narrative, recounting the spiritual transformation of condemned prisoners.[19] Examples of the genre published in New England were almost certainly modeled on a number of very similar accounts produced by British clergymen during the second half of the seventeenth century.[20] Those accounts were, in turn, variants of the "spiritual" biographies and autobiographies so popular among religious readers in early modern England.[21] Although at least one volume of execution sermons of the late seventeenth century implied that its criminal subject had achieved salvation, the first fully-developed conversion narrative published in New England was appended to a volume of execution sermons in 1701.[22] The first criminal conversion narrative published separately in the region did not appear until 1726.[23] Another such narrative was published in Boston in 1738.[24] While various subsequent works described the spiritual

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